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A Birthday Salute to

Helen Lundeborg



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(cover)

Self - Portrait (with Landscape)

1944

Oil on canvas


17 x 28 in. (43.2 x 71.1 cm)

Gift of Lorser Feitelson /

Helen Lundeberg Feitelson Foundation,

Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers,

The State University of New Jersey



A Birthday Salute to

Helen Lundeborg

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American Art Council of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Helen Lundeberg

An Appreciation

I l e n e

S u s a n

F o r t

Associate Curator,
American Art

Helen Lundeberg, who has long been one of Los Angeles's most significant modernists, celebrates her eightieth birthday this year. She began her career at a time when the city could claim few progressive artists. Eventually she attained a national reputation more notable than those of most other local artists of her generation. She did so by quietly pursuing her own vision.

Lundeberg has created a remarkable oeuvre that embodies many dichotomies. A subjective strain predominates, but her visual statements are also always about life's universals. The distinctly personal nature of her work, however, did not prevent her from participating in

contemporaneous developments in the world of art. One of the artistic vanguard, she nevertheless early chose to base her modernism on a strong classical foundation.

She began exhibiting publicly in 1931 and only two years later was given her first solo exhibition. Along with Lorser Feitelson, who was first her teacher and later her husband, she issued in 1934 the manifesto *New Classicism*. Also known as "subjective classicism," the aesthetic soon became identified as "post-surrealism," due to its debt to the European phenomenon. Yet unlike European surrealists, who promoted the role of accident and the unconscious in the creation of a work of art, Lundeberg and Feitelson infused their painting with a sense of order and rationality. This they did by deliberately using the principle of association to create ensembles from what appear to be random arrangements of unrelated objects. Though such works cannot be literally "read," their meaning is suggested by the type of objects selected and their placement within a composition.

At this early phase in Lundeberg's development, the subjective had already found its prominent place, as had the mystery, reserve, and classical order that so often pervades her images. It was this early aesthetic that brought Lundeberg her first national recognition: the group of post-surrealists that formed around her and Feitelson was accorded exhibitions at museums in San Francisco and Brooklyn in 1935, and Lundeberg was asked to participate the following year in the landmark *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Continuing to explore post-surrealism in the 1940s, she was repeatedly invited to show her work in exhibitions throughout the country.

Another, less creative, and less self-assured artist might have been content to continue in the idiom that established her reputation, but not Helen Lundeberg. By the 1950s she had abandoned the aesthetic of her highly programmatic, post-surrealist canvases. Still concerned with reality on an abstract, conceptual level, she began to explore the formal potential of the physical world's appearance. She became intrigued by the way a few flat geometric shapes could be arranged to create the illusion of the third dimension. Because of her preference for classical form, she had always conceived of the material world in simplified terms, but now her environment became even sparer, limited to interiors devoid of all but a few pieces of furniture or to wide-

open, empty landscapes. Eventually she developed the minimalist, yet poetic, hard-edge style that has since distinguished her art.

Although Lundeborg's mature paintings are akin to those of the Los Angeles abstract classicists—Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, Frederick Hammersley, and John McLaughlin—her work remains distinct from theirs. Unlike these hard-edge painters, Lundeborg never developed a completely nonobjective art, insisting that some suggestion of reality be retained. Painting never became a purely intellectual exercise for her. Moreover, due to her frequent use of curvilinear forms and the nuances of her soft, tonal palette, Lundeborg's style is more sensuous than the art of other Los Angeles geometric abstractionists.

Despite these transformations, Lundeborg's art demonstrates a strong continuity of themes. The recurrence of self-portraits in her oeuvre indicates the degree to which her personality dominates. In the post-surrealist compositions of the 1930s and early 1940s she represented herself in profile and eventually as a shadow. In the more complex compositions with many different types of objects, Lundeborg's presence was often limited to only one part of her body, usually her hand holding a paint brush or flower. More oblique references to the artist were the inclusion of her own paintings in interior scenes, either hanging on walls or set on easels. During the late 1950s and

1960s, when she pared her visual statements down, she continued to recycle the basic objects of her material environment: tables, mirrors, her own canvases, doorways, and desert views. The artist and her world became so familiar that the inclusion of the figure of Lundeborg was no longer necessary for understanding the self-referential nature of her artistic statement. Eventually her paintings alluded to her presence even when she was absent.

The number of works in which she portrayed herself as a painter demonstrates how important the concepts of creativity and illusion have been to her. Lundeborg equated the process of creating a work of art with birth and with the generative cycle of nature, including in these compositions images of plant forms in all stages of development, botanical and biological diagrams, and landscapes with floating celestial orbs. Later she explored the notion of creation through a single type of object; for example, in the Planet Series of the 1960s, she enlarged the spheres of earlier canvases and presented them in a square format. The heavenly bodies floating in a mysterious, blackened atmosphere were meant as emblems of the eternal, while the shape of the canvas symbolized the transitory.

The different levels of reality, as well as the duality of reality and illusion, have also been a strong undercurrent. Early in her development she began to play the visual game of a painting within a painting.

In her interiors she hung painted portraits that were often re-creations from old photographs, while sometimes a reflection in a mirror or a shadow cast on a wall served as the physical evidence of a person who was not actually present. In the interiors from the 1950s the artist set one of her paintings of a landscape next to an aperture through which the actual scene could be viewed, thereby juxtaposing the painted image with the supposedly real one. In actuality, however, both landscapes were the result of Lundeborg's own artifice. At the end of the following decade she further blurred the distinction between the real and the perceived in her "figure landscapes," canvases in which colored, horizontal bands represented both a recumbent female torso and a sweeping vista.

Lundeborg's paintings since the 1960s appear to be simple, visually pleasing arrangements of flat, geometric shapes in a limited, almost monochromatic palette; however, these compositions are as structured, complicated, and mysterious as her early, surreal work. Imagery and color are manipulated to evoke moods. A poetic silence, order, and calm usually pervade these late interior and exterior spaces. Lundeborg has looked beyond the ordinary, creating an art that can be appreciated on multiple levels and understood to a certain degree, but despite the contemplation her art suggests and, in fact, requires, in the end it always remains an enigma.

New Classicism

By

Helen

Lundeberg

This text and the accompanying illustration were issued by Helen Lundeberg and Lorser Feitelson in 1934 as a brochure. The essay was written by Lundeberg and served as the manifesto for post-surrealism.

"*Plant and Animal Analogies*" is an example of New Classicism, the Post-Surrealist movement originated in Los Angeles by Lorser Feitelson and the author. In formulating the principles of New Classicism we have developed a veritably **new** and **unprecedented** aesthetic order. Balance, rhythm, unity, are not abandoned, but are attained through entirely new means. The "unity-experience" becomes wholly **introspective**; rhythm is experienced through **contemplation** of the subjective relationships and sequences of forms and groups of forms.

Whereas the traditional mechanisms of aesthetic organization in painting have been based upon the limitations of normal visual perception, the mechanisms of New Classicism are based upon the normal functioning of the **mind**: its meanderings, logical in sequence though not in ensemble, its perceptions of analogy and idea-content in forms and groups of forms unrelated in size, time or space. The new aesthetic form is **subjective**, an ordered, pleasurable, introspective activity; an arrangement of **emotions** or **ideas**. The pictorial elements function **only** to create this subjective form: either **emotional** or **mood-entity**, or **intellectual** or **idea-entity**.

"*Plant and Animal Analogies*," by the author, exemplifies the organization of intellectually significant forms creating an **idea-entity**, the synthesis of which appeals to our conscious intellectual nature, rather than to our sensual, emotional, or subconscious nature, as do the works of the introspective-expressionists (Surrealists), Dali, Miro, Ernst, and others. "*Plant and Animal Analogies*" presents simultaneously extremely dissimilar experiences of form: those directly visual-perceptive and those purely conceptive. The conceptive or diagrammatic forms conditioned introspectively by the visually perceived forms are related to each other intellectually in their logical sequence by diagrammatic arrows and dotted lines. The aesthetic in this picture is experienced in the contemplation of this idea-unity, an aesthetic which is at once classic and unparalleled.

It should be understood that New Classicism differs not only from expressionist-Surrealism, but also from that Surrealism which, possessing an aesthetic appeal, arranges subjective material in accordance with the traditional principles of objective surface organization. The **aesthetic structure** in the works of Lurcat, Pierre Roy, Chirico, Severini, Dali, and Max Ernst is of no historical significance, since it is still imitative and manneristic in its faithful mimicry of the essential principles of pictorial pattern to be found in Renaissance painting. In New Classicism alone do we find an aesthetic which departs from the principles of the decorative graphic arts to found an unique order, an integrity of subject matter and pictorial structure unprecedented in the history of art.

(opposite)

Plant and Animal Analogies

1934–35

Oil on Celotex

24 x 30 in. (61.0 x 76.2 cm)

Collection of the artist,

courtesy of Tobey C. Moss Gallery, Los Angeles





Persephone

c. 1933

Oil on Celotex

25¹/₈ x 17¹/₄ in. (63.8 x 43.8 cm)

Jack Rutberg Fine Arts, Los Angeles

"Miss Lundeborg demonstrates that by painting a stone on a grained board and merely placing a shell against the stone the mind will create for itself an island in a vast ocean."

Arthur Millier, "Surrealists Take Time by Forelock and Stage Exhibit," *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1934, part II, p. 6.

The Red Planet

1934

Oil on Celotex

30 x 24 in. (76.2 x 61.0 cm)

Collection of Roselyne and Richard Swig



"She [Lundeborg] dreams about planets, attracts them to her room and drinks in their topaz light."

Joe Solman, "The Post Surrealists of California," *Art Front 2* (June 1936): 12.

Cosmicide

1935

Oil on Masonite

40 x 24 in. (101.6 x 61.0 cm)

Nebraska Art Association,
gift of Peter Kiewit Foundation,
courtesy of Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery,
University of Nebraska at Lincoln



"Convinced that the internal structure and the meaning of the picture should determine its peripheral shape, Lundberg painted Cosmicide as a trapezoid, its top narrower to accommodate a single object. Once again, subject matter relates to her interest in science, and the theme, the eternal cycle of life and death, is universal and timeless."

Diane De Gasis Moran, "Post-Surrealism: The Art of Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundberg," *Arts Magazine* 57 (December 1982): 127.

Double Portrait of the Artist in Time

1935

Oil on Masonite

48 x 40 in. (121.9 x 101.6 cm)

National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



"For the portrait of myself as a child I used a photograph which I still have....I also used the clock to show that it was a quarter past two which corresponds to the child's age....Instead of presenting myself as an adult before a painting of myself as a child...I reversed this possibility where the child casts a shadow which is that of an adult who appears in the portrait on the wall. The painting on the wall actually exists."

Lundeberg, quoted in Joseph E. Young,
"Helen Lundeberg, An American Independent,"
Art International 15 (September 1971): 46.

Relative Magnitude

1936

Oil on Masonite

30 x 24 in. (76.2 x 61.0 cm)

Collection of the artist,

courtesy of Tobey C. Moss Gallery, Los Angeles



Spheres

1945

Oil on canvasboard

15½ x 12 in. (39.4 x 30.5 cm)

Collection of Frank M. Finck, M.D.



Poetic Justice

1945

Oil on cardboard

13 x 17½ in. (33.0 x 44.5 cm)

The Oakland Museum



The Mirror, no. 2

1951

Oil on canvas

30 x 36 in. (76.2 x 91.4 cm)

Collection of the artist,

courtesy of Tobey C. Moss Gallery, Los Angeles

"My aim has always been to create poetry in visual terms. 'The Mirror'...is subjective in organization: that is, all of its pictorial elements, formal and figurative, must contribute to its lyric unity, of mood or emotional import....Detail is eliminated for subjective ends....The associations, the 'meanings' of recognizable forms are necessary to the kind of poetic entities I wish to create."

Lundeberg, in University of Illinois, Urbana,
Contemporary American Painting, 1952, p. 210.



Selma

1957

Oil on canvas

30 x 24 in. (76.2 x 61.0 cm)

Collection of James and Linda Ries

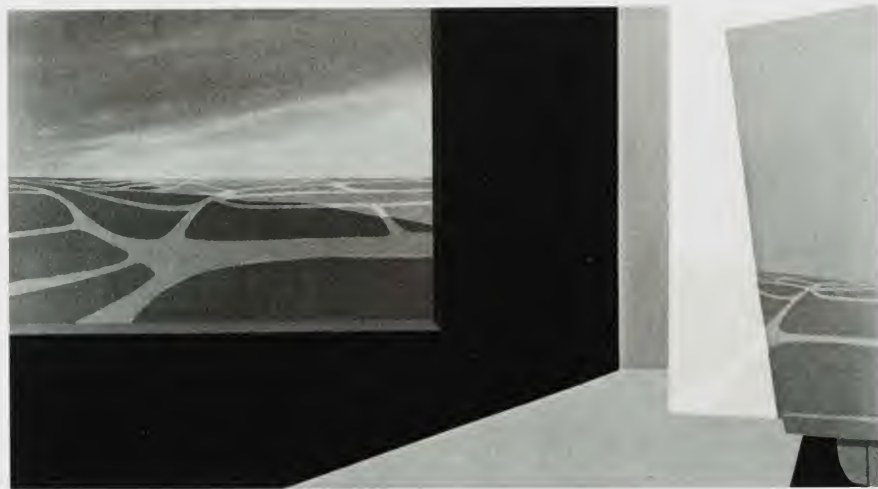
**The Lonely Ways**

1958

Oil on canvas

20 x 36 in. (50.8 x 91.4 cm)

Collection of Mark Seldis



Shadow on the Road to the Sea

1960

Oil on canvas

40 x 50 in. (101.6 x 127 cm)

Great Western Bank

"Helen Lundeberg relies heavily on sensitive nuances of color.... Her poetry oriented canvases, in spite of their non-objectivity, are echoes of nature in which a high horizontal marks the boundary of sky to which simple contours of land or sea rise."

Constance Perkins, "An Active Center of Hard-Edge Art," *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 1964, part IV, p. 4.





The Shadow of the Bridge

1962

Oil on canvas

50 x 50 in. (127.0 x 127.0 cm)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas C. McCray

"I was interested in the illusions of space and dimension one could create with these absolutely flat, unmodelled geometric areas."

Lundeborg, in *Los Angeles Art Community:*
Helen Lundeborg interview, 1974.

Still Life

1961

Oil on canvas

24 x 20 in. (61.0 x 50.8 cm)

Collection of the artist,
courtesy of Tobey C. Moss Gallery, Los Angeles



Untitled

1964

Acrylic on canvas

60 x 60 in. (152.4 x 152.4 cm)

Collection of the artist,

courtesy of Tobey C. Moss Gallery, Los Angeles

*"I've always been fascinated by illusionism...
always liked arch forms, the combination of the
straight line and the more or less subtle curve."*

Lundeberg, in *Los Angeles Art Community*:
Helen Lundeberg interview, 1974.



Among the Planets

1965

Oil and alkyd enamel on canvas

60 x 60 in. (152.4 x 152.4 cm)

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,

Smithsonian Institution, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest, 1981

"These works [Planet Series] defined the union of opposites, melding the circle of the planets, symbolic of the eternal, with the square of the canvas, symbolic of the transitory."

Lundeberg, in *Los Angeles Art Community: Helen Lundeberg interview*, 1974.



Linear Torso, no. 4

1969

Acrylic on canvas

60 x 60 in. (152.4 x 152.4 cm)

Collection of Gloria Ellwood



"Her muted colors, the undulating, organic line she often chooses to employ and her highly successful attempt to merge figural and horizontal contours allow us to see and feel the very essence of her visual poetry."

Henry J. Seldis, in *La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, Helen Lundeborg, 1972*.

Aegean Light

1973

Acrylic on canvas

60 x 60 in. (152.4 x 152.4 cm)

Collection of Frank M. Finck, M.D.

"I am...a classicist by nature as well as conviction. By classicism I mean, not traditionalism of any sort, but a highly conscious concern with aesthetic structure which is the antithesis of intuitive, romantic, or realistic approaches to painting. My aim...is to calculate, and reconsider, every element in a painting with regard to its function in the whole organization."

Lundeborg, in *Museum of Modern Art, New York, Americans 1942, 1942*, p. 93.



Grey Interior, III

1980

Acrylic on canvas

60 x 50 in. (152.4 x 127.0 cm)

Collection of Palm Springs Desert Museum,
gift of Helen Lundeberg Feitelson

Wetlands, IV

1984

Acrylic on canvas

60 x 60 in. (152.4 x 152.4 cm)

Security Pacific Corporation, Los Angeles



Selected

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Ilene Susan Fort

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